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Distance Learning: Creating a Teacher-as-Researcher Learning Environment Via the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the creation of a teacher as researcher learning environment in one small rural Idaho elementary school via the Internet. At the request of five elementary school teachers the researcher created an on-line course, "Teacher as Researcher," which provided instruction on both Action Research and Teacher as Researcher methodology. The researcher examined, analyzed, and described the learning process that took place among the teachers as novice on-line learners, between the teachers as teacher researchers, and the elements and processes that constituted their creation of a local learning community. The researcher met with the students at their request in real time for three consecutive days toward the end of the course to discuss the learning process that had transpired, answer questions, and bring closure to the teacher as researcher learning experience. The researcher views the Internet as a new medium for action research and teachers as researcher and a new opportunity for learners to discuss, share, and collaborate on classroom issues.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the creation of a teacher as researcher learning environment in one small rural Idaho elementary school via the Internet. At the request of five rural elementary school teachers the researcher created a three credit graduate online course, "Teacher-as-Researcher." The researcher also met in real time with the teacher researchers to discuss the learning process that had transpired, answer questions, and bring closure to the teacher as researcher learning experience.

The primary purpose of the course was to cultivate a growing capacity within the teachers to listen with wonder, mutual respect, and a sense of awareness to the ongoing process of change in their world. The teachers through participation in, interaction with, and transformation of their and others' social world and lived experience contributed toward the continual improvement of self and others, of the organization, and

of the school community in which they lived and worked. They contributed to this improvement through examination, identification, and analysis of an identified group concern.

The course provided a qualitative research foundation in both Action Research and Teacher as Researcher methodology. The researcher examined, analyzed, and described the learning process that took place among the teachers as novice on-line learners, between the teachers as teacher researchers, and the elements and processes that emerges as they created a local learning community. The researcher views the Internet as a new medium for creating action researchers and teachers as researchers and a new opportunity for learners to discuss, share, and collaborate on classroom issues and create ongoing learning communities.

The course examined the historical and philosophical foundations of "teacher research" and "action research." Some theorists place action research under the umbrella of teacher re-

search. Such terms as “action research,” “practioner research,” “teacher-as-scholar,” “practical inquiry,” “interactive research,” “classroom inquiry,” and “practice-centered inquiry” can all be found in the literature to describe teacher research (Downhower, Melvin, and Sizemore, 1990; Williamson, 1992). Information was drawn from the teacher as researcher and action research literature to address the expressed needs of the teachers.

Key to understanding the concept of teacher as researcher is that the teacher is an active constructor of knowledge rather than a passive consumer of it (Miller and Pine, 1990; Williamson, 1992). “Constructivism” as this concept is also called is based on the work of Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1978). Fosnot (1996) synthesized the work of Piaget and Vygotsky. She stated that implied in constructivism “is the idea that we as human beings have no access to an objective reality since we are constructing our version of it, while at the same time transforming it and ourselves” (p. 23).

The course provided the teachers with the tools and skills necessary to become agents of inquiry and change. The course consisted of initial foundational readings. The teachers then examined their professional world to identify a topic or issue of concern that they each wished to address. Rather than work alone, the teachers decided to work collaboratively as a team.

The teachers became immersed in the process of trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge. The teachers enhanced and improved their research and practice knowledge through the conceptualization of a research process built around an identified problem or issue. They then did a review of the literature related to their research. The teachers selected a method of gathering data. They created a plan of action. They then analyzed the gathered data. Finally, the teachers created a plan of evaluation and a process for reporting the research findings.

The issue around which they wished collectively to bring about a desired change was to find a viable way to pass on student information to a student’s future teachers. Pertinent student

information was not always passed on to a student’s new teachers. Teachers spent a lot of time trying to determine the status and progress of each new student they received. Therefore, the question that the teachers asked was, “How can the staff establish and implement a process of sharing student information with future teachers to aid in the child’s transition to a new grade?”

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research project is a simple case study. The selection of participants was limited to those elementary school teachers who requested and enrolled for credit in the three credit graduate level course entitled, “Teacher-as-Researcher.” The course was offered via the internet. This mode of delivery was selected because of the rural nature of the participant’s geographic location and the distance of that location from the nearest university. The nearest university was approximately 120 miles to the north. Interestingly, the instructor for this course was located 180 miles to the south of the district’s location.

Research techniques used by the instructor of this course, as a teacher researcher, included analysis of journal submissions, discussion container submissions, open-ended interviews, a brief survey, and a course evaluation (Patton, 1990). The data was not collected, but “co-authored” by the researcher and the subjects of the study (Kvale, 1988). Limitations of this style of research include the researcher’s tendency to interpret along the way; a tendency that may result in condensing and summarizing the “meaning” of the data. In this particular project the researcher approached the project with no preconceived notions. The researcher exhibited certain skills or aptitudes beneficial to qualitative researchers, e.g. good investigative skills, doggedness, the ability to draw people out, and the ability to avoid premature closure and conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The investigation relied upon multiple sources of evidence: interviews, the course web site, literature, a survey, a three consecutive day visitation with the teacher researchers, and a course evaluation. The data were analyzed

through explanation.

Results

Results include the group's research project process, their learning insights, comments, and conclusions.

The students enrolled in the Teacher as Researcher online course expressed their excitement about the course being available to them in their community. They also expressed their fears and concerns about "doing research," but especially about learning qualitative research. All of the students were masters level graduate students in teacher education at the University of Idaho, Moscow.

The usual challenges of registration, obtaining the text, connectivity, and the fears associated with online learning were met and the students began to learn, make new knowledge, and build a local as well as an online learning community. At the end of the three day real time visit by the instructor, the teachers were asked to respond anonymously to a number of questions about the course:

1. Are you learning? If so, what? If not, what can be done to better facilitate your learning?
2. Describe and discuss whether or not the online and realtime instruction met your learning needs.
3. What were the strengths of the course?
4. Describe and discuss any wishes you may have for this or future online courses?
5. Please share any last thoughts you may have.

Are you learning?

All of the teacher researchers were in agreement that the class was an excellent learning experience. One student stated, "I have learned to become a better researcher in a qualitative context. I have learned that research can be fun and it's ok. I can give myself permission to research anything!" Another student indicated, "I realized that I am professionally important. I was able to tie all of the little pieces together to get a better, bigger picture of the research process. I

feel I have more confidence in my choices and to trust my perceptions. I was able to learn from my colleagues." A third student stated, "I learned that the entire process easily fits into my teacher's role, how much choice I have as a teacher and over my decisions. I feel empowered!"

Describe and discuss whether or not the online and realtime instruction met your learning needs.

All of the students were in agreement that course format, curriculum, and instruction were excellent. One student stated, "The instructor did an excellent job of sharing the material, of presenting the content in a friendly manner, and in bringing all of us into the process." Another indicated that "The instructor was an excellent online and real-time facilitator that (sic) kept the flow going and still enabled all to thoroughly explore their thoughts." Another stated, as a result of the instruction, "I feel more comfortable with my role as a researcher now." Finally, one student stated, "The online approach you established was very concrete, easy to follow, and set up to begin right away (sic). You took time to respond immediately to discussions and reflections so that our thoughts weren't set out into a big vacuum (sic). The real-time portion was also very valuable in that the discussion became very real to us as practitioners and the connection to the information was immediate."

What were the strengths of the course?

All of the students elaborated on the strengths of the course. One student enumerated a number of strengths. She stated,

1. The sense of community that was built;
2. The validation of previous effort;
3. The acceptance as professional;
4. The solid foundation the was established;
5. The online course was ready to use and easy to access;
6. The immediate feedback;
7. The emphasis on reflection; and
8. The willingness to be so open."

Another listed,

1. We stayed on task;
2. There was respect for all who shared;
3. The instructor's knowledge of other sources was invaluable;
4. Also invaluable was the instructor's background knowledge of the subject matter and how he made many connections, and
5. The instructor had a balanced and resourceful soul (sic).

Describe and discuss any wishes you may have for this or future online courses.

Finally, the students were asked if they had any wishes. The first student replied that she wished that "more professionals would be exposed to this type of course." Another student stated, "I would like to see this course offered as part of an in-service for school districts in Idaho. It should have more exposure besides the graduate level."

Please share any last thoughts you may have.

The comments of two students seemed to capture the thoughts of the entire class about their learning experience as teacher researchers. The first student stated, "The most valuable aspects of this course were being allowed the freedom to explore and discuss issues as a group and being valued as a professional." The second student concluded, "This course was one of the most valuable classes in my graduate program. The content was something I could take into my classroom and continue working with the rest of my career. It unified our profession as a whole and gave concrete ideas for teacher as researcher."

DISCUSSION

Many challenges face the instructor wishing to use the Internet as a classroom. Encountering challenges is especially true when trying to create and guide an interactive teacher as researcher learning environment via the Internet.

Learning is a process of active engagement with experience. Learning is what people do when they want to make sense of the world.

Learning may involve an increase in skills, knowledge, understanding, values and the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and a desire to learn more. (The Campaign for Learning, 1998)

Learning occurs in the interplay between expectation and experience, as Kolb (1984) suggested, and is an intellectual process of constructing knowledge, i.e. acquiring, processing, assimilating, and integrating information and ideas through constructive sociocultural interaction. Learning is sustained by mental stimulation and encouraged by the proper environment. Karaliotas (1998) stated,

A working definition of such an environment in distance learning settings can be outlined as being an intellectual, social, cultural, psychological milieu which facilitates and supports learning by fostering interaction, collaboration, and communality" (p. 1).

This class generated a list of "thoughts" or "learnings" that grew out of the interaction, collaboration, and communality. The list of learnings was taken directly off of the whiteboard and are as follows:

1. One cannot look at the world as black or white. Everything can be viewed as existing along a continuum.
2. Reflection needs to be an on-going process.
3. Everything is a process.
4. You are not only a researcher as a teacher, but also an instrument of research.
5. Where do you stand? (What do you stand for? Where do you draw your professional and ethical line in the sand?)
6. You always get to choose. (Each person gets to decide.)
7. Give yourself permission (to be, to research, to learn, to live.)
8. Find your own way. What works best for you? (As a teacher researcher, you do not have to follow someone else's model).
9. Make the process your own.
10. Invest yourself (Engage in life, learning, teaching, the process of living).
11. Invest in yourself (You are important, as

a person, a teacher, a professional, a researcher).

12. Keep it simple (Do not complicate your research or life).
13. We are not alone (isolated).
14. Have fun!

Three months after the course ended the instructor received the following e-mail message from one of the students that had been in the class.

Just thought I'd let you know that the fifth grade teachers loved our student inventory sheets, and are talking about using the same form to pass information on to the sixth grade teachers. Guess (sic) our research was fruitful! Also, I am continuing my role of teacher as researcher into a new area. I am pursuing research in the area of homework. There are mountains of conflicting research available, and I am enjoying my journey through this process. I intend to conduct some surveys with both students and parents after further research into this issue. Your prediction was correct. Once we began this process as a teacher-researcher, we would continue to define our role as a teacher. I am hooked!

With new technologies comes the challenge and joy of creating new, interactive learning environments that facilitate learning and promote open and constructive dissemination of knowledge. Interestingly, learning in such an online environment takes place for the instructor as a teacher researcher, as well as the student teacher-researcher.

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